

Identity and Duality

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Identity and Duality

BY YOUNG IMM KANG SONG

Through the arts, children find meaningful access to their heritage. Without such literacy, that heritage itself will molder as a skeleton in an unopened closet. The arts require a seeing eye in order to live. (Eisner, 1989, p. 19)

A fairly common understanding among teachers is that the study of the arts opens up the study of cultures. Appreciating the artistic expressions of a culture enhances student understanding of that culture and its people. Beyond appreciation, when students make artworks, they create meaning and explore their perceptions of various cultural roles. Expressing complex cultural backgrounds through art making allows for a kind of multidimensionality in the classroom, as students come to personally appreciate multicultural approaches, including their own and other cultural perspectives (Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr, 2001; Chalmers, 2002, 2006; Kuster, 2006; McFee & Degge, 1977; Nieto, 1999).

The term "culture" is complex, encompassing beliefs, ideas, and actions that influence how people think, act, and place value and meaning on things in the world (Nieto, 1999; Saravia-Shore & Arvizu, 1992). Working with students with a dual cultural identity can be challenging. For example, students who identify with one culture by ethnicity and family but live in another cultural context face a more complex task than understanding and expressing a single identity (Eaton, 1991; Nieto, 1999; Saravia-Shore & Arvizu, 1992). Garber (1995) describes "border studies" as referencing the intersection points between two cultures in which some elements overlap and others diverge. Desai (2003) suggests that an examination of these cultural borders can occur through viewing or creating works of art that explore and expose these overlapping

areas. Building tolerance and even appreciation for ambiguity, a long-recognized characteristic of creative people (Powell, personal communication, March 28, 2005), can be one outcome of border studies. Living in more than one cultural context is often a struggle—it asks one to embrace a pluralistic persona, for which one must juggle ideas and perspectives. Anzaldúa (1990) notes that, "awareness of our situation must come before inner changes, which in turn comes before changes in society. Nothing happens in the real world unless it first happens in the images in our heads" (p. 385). Changing the image in our heads may begin through an artistic exploration of cultural identity; what follows describes growth in understanding, accepting, and owning of one's multifaceted identity.

Workshop: Exploring Identity and Duality

At a Korean Saturday School in New York, 15 second-generation Korean-American high school students participated in a 3-week workshop.¹ These students attended American schools during the week and learned Korean on the weekends at this special school. In line with Donaldson's theory (1996), which emphasizes that "the arts are a core component of multicultural education because throughout the history of human existence, culture and experience have remained alive in 'the bosom' of the arts" (p. 27), this workshop used creative artmaking as a teaching tool to explore students' identity, heritage, and culture, and to help them better understand who they are and where they come from. Though I was the instructor of this workshop, I was not separate from this experience. I related to these students because I am a Korean-American, born in Korea and living in America for more than 10 years.

The goals of this workshop were to help students (1) find insight in overcoming stereotypes of either of their cultures, (2) find citizenship and meaning in both cultures, and (3) accept and maintain both cultural identities. I hoped they might learn to move back and forth between their cultures with grace.

Week 1:

Who am I?

During the first week of the workshop, the students and I had many conversations about issues of identity. Some questions included: Who am I? Am I American or Korean? What is my identity? Do I have to accept or understand Korean culture even though I am an American citizen? These lively discussions provided an opportunity for students to think about their identities and bring to surface their struggles with the duality of being Korean-Americans. Literature on cultural understanding suggests that this sort of "dialogical inquiry" can be a powerful method for engaging issues of culture and helps to focus conversations on "sympathetic listening and thoughtful talking" (Bastos, 2006, p. 21).

As Korean-Americans, students may identify culturally as Americans since many have spent much of their lives in the United States. However, outsiders often view them as "Asian" due to their appearance. Thus, their personal identity may not match the identity imposed on them by others. Additionally, they navigate two cultural worlds: the world of their parents, who are much more closely tied to Korean culture, and the world of school and other public places. These two cultural worlds can be difficult for students to reconcile. Similarly, deciding which of these worlds apply to them, and what traits truly encompass and define them, is a challenging process of crafting a meaningful and relevant identity that reconciles self, parental, and outsider expectations.

Some of these second-generation students have never been to Korea, and they struggle to understand this aspect of their identity. At

home, the students live with Korean parents and celebrate Korean holidays. Because of the strong cultural emphasis on Confucianism, many students are expected to respect and follow the directions of their elders in the Korean household and culture. However, in American schools, students are encouraged and even expected to express their thoughts and ideas, even if these ideas question authority or differ from those of their teachers. Furthermore, while most students understand the Korean language, they cannot speak it properly. Limits in communication can result in a feeling of being outsiders, even within their families. This feeling persists outside of the family as well; at school and in their communities, they are often classified as foreigners because of the differences in phenotype—despite being American-born citizens (personal communication, April 30, 2005). These children are caught between two different cultures: Korean and American.

One word frequently used in such discussions of identity and duality is "culture." This is an important concept for students to grasp if they are to successfully integrate two primary aspects of their identity. "Culture" is understood in various ways by different scholars. For example, Clifford Geertz defines the concept of "culture" as:

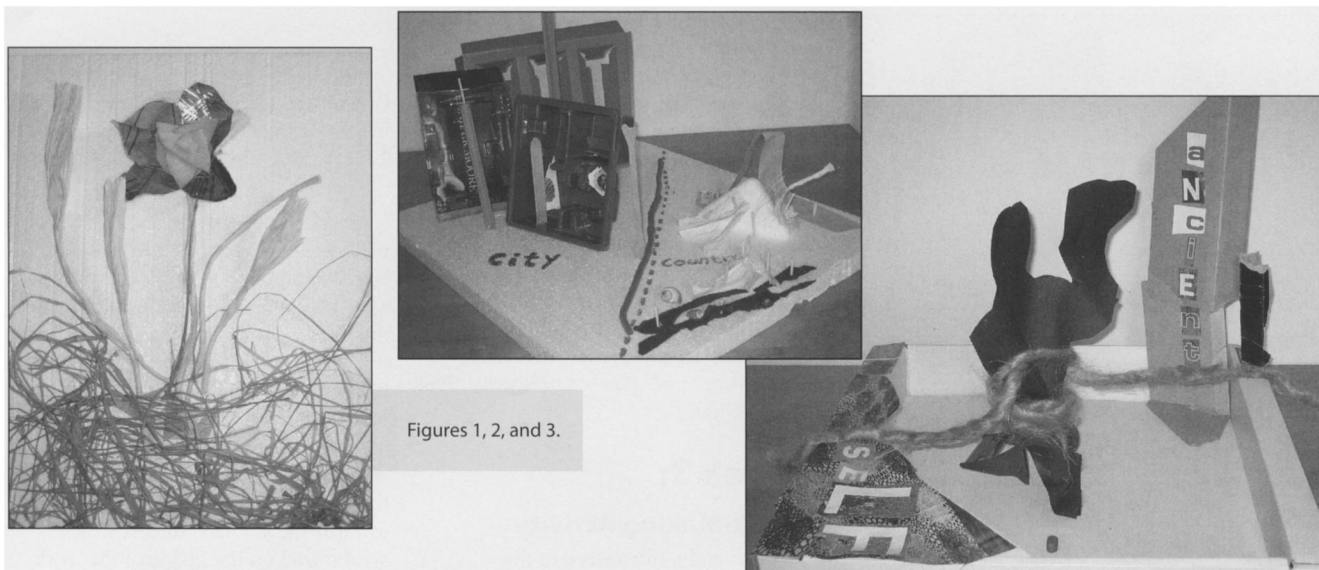
a system of meanings embodied in symbols [which] is to say not only that it is ... a system of world-views, values, and so forth ("meanings"), but also that one gains access to it not through some act of mystical empathy with informants, but through the (recording and) interpretation of the publicly available forms in which it is encoded (the "symbols"). (Ortner 1999, p. 6)

According to John H. Bodley (1994), the historical definition of culture is a "social heritage, or tradition, that is passed on to future generations," whereas the symbolic definition of culture is "arbitrarily assigned meanings that are shared by a society" (§ 5). Other scholars emphasize the sociological elements of culture as they provide structure, norms, and cues for dynamic social environments. Ballengee-Morris & Stuhr (2001) suggest:

Culture provides beliefs, values, and the patterns that give meaning and structure to life. It enables individuals within the multiple social groups of which they are part to function effectively in their social and cultural environments, which are constantly changing. (p. 6)

Although each of these definitions encompasses elements of culture, individuals often define culture for themselves. Explaining and differentiating their culture to outsiders is also a challenge for Korean-American students. One of the greatest struggles comes from being grouped together into one Asian stereotype despite differences among Koreans, Chinese, Japanese, and other Asians. They are often considered to all have the same language, culture, interests, skills, and thoughts. This is deeply hurtful to many teenagers who want to assert their own individuality (personal communication, April 30, 2005).

To address this outsider perception of a single uniform "Asian" culture, one goal of the workshop was to help students pinpoint which aspects of Korean culture are distinct from other Asian cultures by using the arts. If students can understand and communicate these differences, they will be better prepared to educate others about what being Korean really means. Through a slideshow presentation, students viewed traditional Korean artworks, such as the Celadon Incense Burner with open work design in Koryo Dynasty, a gold Buckle, and a Pensive Bodhisattva.² They also viewed designs of traditional Korean architecture, such as house styles, gates, and windows.³ We examined traditional gate-knockers with elaborate designs portraying Korean spiritual and mythical images. Traditional Korean houses are surrounded by fences, in the center of which is a large gate representing



Figures 1, 2, and 3.

the threshold between the outside world and the intimate world of the family. In similar fashion, gate-knockers are significant as charms or talismans that protect the home from evil spirits and bad luck.

We discussed these artistic expressions of Korean ancestors and the meaning of this art. The elaborate rice-paper window designs of the Korean tradition surprised the students. After looking at the *Hanok* houses in which their ancestors lived, the students expressed awe and feelings of connectedness to the culture of their ancestors. One student said, "I didn't realize that Korean designs and architecture were so intricate and beautiful" (personal communication, April 30, 2005). Another said, "We have a Korean painting in my living room that I always thought was out of place with the rest of our modern-Western style house. Now I don't think it looks so weird. I actually feel like it's more a part of me and my family" (personal communication, April 30, 2005). As Adejumo (2002) notes, "culture entails a complex range of human traits, such as customs, norms, morals and values. The established ways-of-life within a culture are usually transferable from one generation to another" (p. 35), and the arts assist in this process.

The Korean architectural images helped the students gain a new appreciation of Korean culture by equipping them with a new perspective. It also demystified some elements around them that were previously significant to their parents but not to them. Furthermore, some students were very excited to share the special elements of their ancestors' traditional culture. One

student exclaimed, "Now I can talk about my ancestors' culture [with] my American friends and teachers!" This is especially significant because historical consciousness of one's ancestral identity helps one to find and embrace one's own identity (Chalmers, 2006).

Week 2:

Creating Identity Sculptures

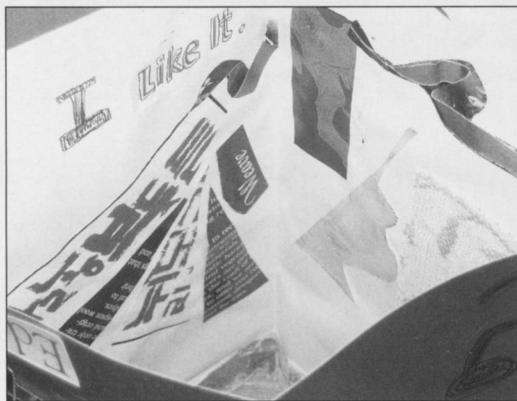
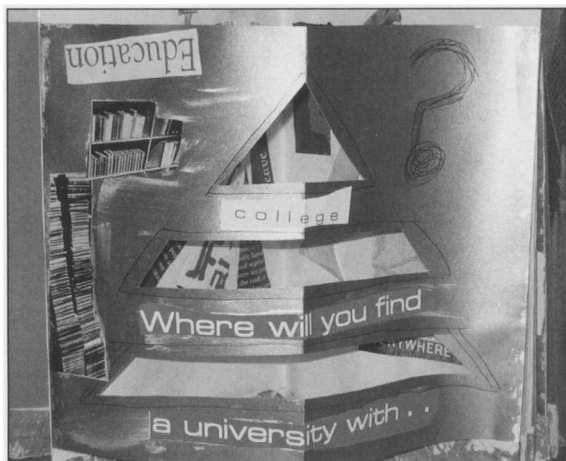
During the second week of the workshop, students were introduced to the concept of using art to express one's cultural identity. I was surprised when many students immediately reacted by doubting their artistic abilities. A few students complained, "I came here to learn Korean, not to do art" (personal communication, May 7, 2005). At first, they did not see the connections between making art and learning about their culture, so they were quite resistant to the activity. To help reduce their skepticism, I provided examples from *Contemporary Art and Multicultural Education*, edited by Susan Cahan and Zoya Kocur (1996), showing how art could be used to explore their identities. Examples included: *Make Me* (1989) by Yong Soon Min; *Issei, Nisei, Sansei...* (1990) by Kristine Yuki Aono; and *The Black Power Glove* (1990) by Danny Tisdale. These works collectively provide insight into how a diverse group of Americans experience their identities and relate to multiple cultures (Cahan & Kocur, 1996). We continued our discussion on more of the issues: Why is it good to explore culture by using the arts? How does making sculptures lead to a deeper understanding of my identity? How will a

creative process help me connect and express the cultures I live between?

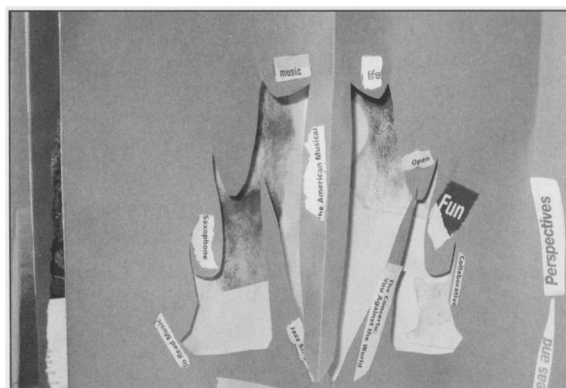
Despite their initial uncertainties about using art to explore issues of identity, the students represented their identities and the connection between the two cultures by creating three-dimensional sculptures using recycled materials, a process they ultimately seemed to enjoy. I was struck by one student's explanation. She said that she always thought she was Caucasian when younger, and only realized that she was Asian in high school. To represent this, she made a flower as a self-portrait (Figure 1). In the middle of the flower, she inconspicuously placed some yellow flower petals, because the "yellow" in her was always there, though never realized.

One student used a red marker to create a dotted line between the "city" and the "country" as a border (Figure 2). Her analogy is that she stands on the border between two cultures, like the adjoining city and country. This is an artistic interpretation of the cultural border ideas expressed by Garber (1995) and Desai (2003). This student was aware that she navigated a space between two distinct cultures and that this intersection formed her reality. She demonstrated through her artwork how both cultures were integral to her identity. Neither stood alone; rather, she needed to mix both cultures into her lifestyle, just like city and country are interrelated.

Another student said that he was tethered to a rope between his ancestors' generation and his own. He did not know where to go or what to be, and his artwork (Figure 3) demonstrated the "pull" he felt from both



Figures 4, 5.



Figures 6, 7.

sides (personal communication, May 7, 2005). Similar to Venet's (2002) research with African American and Cambodian students, I found that this process of dialogue and artmaking allowed my students to learn why artists create art and to increase their "visual and aesthetic vocabularies" (p. 51). They were able to explore their identities, learn ways to use creative expression, and share complex realities with others.

Week 3:

Book-Making Activity

During the third week of the workshop, we did a book-making activity as another way of exploring and synthesizing the students' identity, heritage, and culture. This was an integral part of the workshop because some contemporary art focuses on meaning rather than form (Efland, Freedman, & Stuhr, 1996). In the book-making activity, we reexamined the traditional Korean gate, which can be seen as the boundary between the outside world and the family. Students expressed both their outward lives and inner identities using the gate metaphor. For this activity, I asked students to choose and decorate two sheets of paper. The first was to represent their "gate," expressing their outward appearance. The second, seen through "window" cut-outs in the first, was to represent their inner identity. The two sheets of paper were then glued together on the sides, so that one could look through the gate into the inner identity. Afterwards, we engaged in a discussion about their initial concept, the resulting artworks, and their final thoughts and realizations. A major goal of this activity was to provide insight into students' "reality, experiences, and stories," as well as creating an external "mirror

that reflects the student's own cultural identity and community" (Johnson, 2002, p. 20).

One student explained his work (Figures 4 and 5) by noting that the piece incorporates pyramid designs, which symbolizes legacy and spirituality. While the outside is rather simple, the inside is much more complex; this mirrors his understanding of his multicultural identity. While the outside, symbolizing American culture, is represented as a single color with rather simple designs, there is a feeling that his cultural identity leans more towards the Korean culture, which is symbolized on the inside of the work (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

A second student expressed his cultural curiosity by incorporating a mixture of colors with no boundaries visible through this door (Figure 6). He questioned whether his parents' cultural background should determine his own identity, and showed this through the eruption of color on the inside (Figure 7). His artwork reflected the idea that cultural background "surely plays a part in shaping identity, [but] does not determine identity" (Greene, 1995, p. 163).

A third student described a black strip at the bottom of her artwork (Figure 8) as her secret compartment, the one that holds tension. On the inside (Figure 9), the strong red contrasts with green, visible through a dramatic cut-out. However, she also symbolizes her gradual acceptance of Korean culture through a structure of four windows. She explained that, at first, she made a sharp-edged window at the bottom because she was nervous about examining her inner identity. She then made the other windows round because she gradually felt more open-minded about her identity (personal communication, May 14,

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2005). As a result of this project, she unknowingly adopted Greene's idea (1995), that "we need openness and variety as well as inclusion" (p. 163). This student demonstrated this type of openness in her artistic process.

Another student chose to explore her cultural identities through musical references (Figures 10 and 11). She contemplated the future, in which she will seek to interweave the two cultures rather than choose one over the other. However, when the work was displayed standing up (Figure 11), the two parts were separate though still connected at certain points. This reflects her identity: two cultures, inseparable yet distinct (personal communication, May 14, 2005).

After the individual artworks were complete, we joined them together to make one long book of identities (see p. 19), which represented their shared cultural connection. We then painted a thick green line along the bottom of the book to represent the Taebaek Mountain range, which runs the entire length of the Korean peninsula. This is another symbol of the connectedness they share as Koreans.

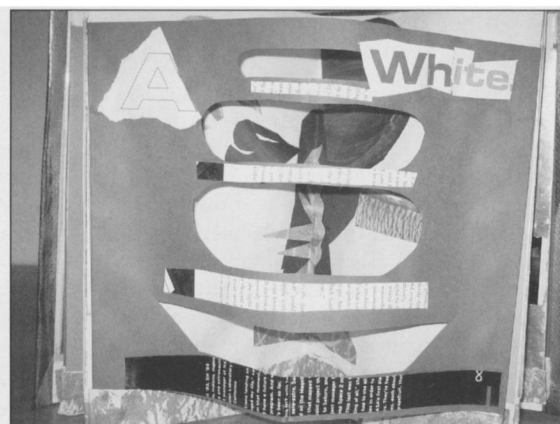
Conclusion and Implications

In this workshop, the artmaking process helped students explore their identities, move beyond their comfort zones, take risks, and look at their experiences in new ways. Art became another language allowing students' realities to take on new meanings. Community was created when students worked together and shared artworks and ideas. Initially, making art was challenging for these students. However, as they felt encouraged to delve deeply into their inner and outer identities, and to examine and reveal the complex fusions between two or more cultures, students gradually found ways to express their personal

issues more freely through newly introduced art making techniques.

I assessed student learning in this workshop informally and continuously. I drew conclusions based on changes in attitude I was able to observe during the 3 weeks as they related to students' comfort level with dual cultural identities. I also asked students to reflect on what they had learned. Students' definitions of art expanded as they learned that a variety of artistic skill levels were valid and useful in conveying their ideas and experiences without critique or judgment. They also grew in appreciation of visual art as a method of self-expression and of investigation of cultural understanding and affiliation. They gained knowledge and pride in their ancestors' culture. I witnessed their ability to integrate their two cultures and navigate cultural boundaries with increasing awareness and comfort.

Through this process of expressing and re-exploring their identities as individuals bridging two cultures, some students gained a new awareness: "I can understand my parents a bit more" (personal communication, May 14, 2005). Other students reported reconsidering issues that were previously challenging: "I think, maybe, having two cultures is actually a good thing" (personal communication, May 14, 2005). Several students said they would be able to use these activities as a launching point for more meaningful conversations with their families, peers, and others who may only see one of their cultural identities. This workshop provided students with tools for exploration, expression, and introspections, and encouraged them to "become more aware of their role as cultural interpreters and the real ethical and social responsibilities accompanying that role" (Cahan & Kocur, 1996, p. xxi).



Figures 8, 9.



Figures 10, 11.

The issues of cultural identity and duality are not limited to Korean-Americans in the United States. Other immigrants or children of immigrants might struggle with similar issues of preserving their own or their parents' cultural identity while integrating many values, ideas, and norms of American culture. Even among students generally viewed as "American," there are cultural gaps between those from different regions, different religions, and different socioeconomic classes.

As Maxine Greene (1995) writes:

To help the diverse students we know articulate their stories is not only to

help them pursue the meanings of their lives—to find out *how* things are happening and to keep posing questions about the why. It is to move them to learn the new things Freire spoke of, to reach out for the proficiencies and capacities, the craft required to be fully participant in this society, and to do so without losing the consciousness of who they are. (p. 165)

The arts help students explore and navigate their own cultures, and understand those of others. Through the arts, we can achieve an understanding of multiple perspectives and see the richness of their

multiplicities. In the context of American society, where one significant characteristic of life is the positive richness of multiple perspectives, students are empowered to claim "all" of who they are.

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ENDNOTES

- 1 To protect the privacy of the participants per their request, the location of the workshop is not disclosed and the students are anonymous.
- 2 The following are links to some informative web sites that provide examples of Korean art:
Ho-Am Art Museum (<http://hoam.samsungfoundation.org/eng/index.asp>);
The National Folk Museum of Korea (<http://www.nfm.go.kr/>);
Korean Art (http://www.korean-arts.com/about_korean_celadon.htm).
- 3 The National Museum of Korea: <http://www.museum.go.kr/eng/>

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